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Key events in Camp Lejeune's water contamination

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Key events in the investigation of contaminated drinking water at Camp Lejeune, N.C.

October 1980: Tests through March 1981 show water at the Hadnot Point treatment plant is "highly contaminated" with chlorinated hydrocarbons. A lab chemist urges further analysis. Officials do not test individual wells to find the contamination source.

May and July 1982: Tests identify TCE and PCE as contaminants in water systems for Hadnot Point and Tarawa Terrace, which served housing, schools, other buildings and swimming pools at Camp Lejeune.

July 1984: The base begins testing individual wells and by February 1985 shuts down 10 contaminated wells. One drinking water sample measured 1,400 parts per billion of TCE. The U.S. government eventually set 5 parts per billion as the maximum safe level for TCE at the tap.

January 1985: A fuel spill closes a clean water system. Homes and a school are connected on an emergency basis to the Hadnot Point system for 12 days. They receive contaminated water.

March through April 1985: A contaminated well that had been shut down is turned on to pump water to residents on four nights to ease a temporary water shortage.

April 1985: The base commander, Maj. Gen. L.H. Buehl, urges families in Tarawa Terrace to conserve water. He says wells were closed as a precaution over "minute" amounts of organic chemicals. He does not mention that contamination exceeded maximum recommended exposure limits several times over.

March 1987: The water treatment system for Tarawa Terrace is shut down and homes are connected to a new water treatment plant.

October 1989: Camp Lejeune is added to the Superfund list of the nation's highly contaminated hazardous waste sites.

August 1997: The U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry concludes that adults had little or no increased cancer risk from the past contaminated water, but raised concern about effects on developing fetuses. It recommended studies on the fetal effects.

August 1998: The health agency finds a link between toxic water and low birth-weight babies born to some women at Camp Lejeune during the years of contamination. The study undercounts mothers who were exposed because it assumes a clean treatment plant provided water for four years before it was constructed.

1999: The health agency begins searching for leukemia cases and birth defects among babies who were in utero at the base from 1968, when birth records first were computerized, until 1985, when contaminated wells were believed to have been shut down.

2003: The health agency begins to study whether Camp Lejeune's contaminated water is linked to birth defects and elevated leukemia rates in its survey of 12,600 children.

October 2004: An outside panel convened by the Marines determines that Camp Lejeune did not understand the significance of its water contamination early on and that Navy environmental advisers were "not aggressive" in assisting them. However, the panel concludes that Marine leadership acted responsibly and provided water quality consistent with general practices at the time.

April 2005: Criminal investigators from the Environmental Protection Agency find no illegal actions or cover-up in Camp Lejeune's handling of its water contamination. The Justice Department declines to prosecute.

June 2007: House Energy and Commerce Committee hears testimony from what it calls "poisoned patriots," families who blame their cancers on Camp Lejeune water.

October 2007: The Senate directs the military to find former Camp Lejeune residents and workers and notify them they may have been exposed to contaminated drinking water.

June 2008: The federal health agency concludes it is feasible to do cancer and mortality studies of adults who were exposed to the tainted water. The agency is laying groundwork for the studies while completing its study of fetal health effects.

April 28, 2009: The health agency withdraws its 1997 public health assessment, stating it contains omissions and inaccuracies.

Sources: Marine Corps chronology, Environmental Protection Agency, Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, Marine Corps documents.

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